

Russian Coup

Dragon Productions revives Brecht's 'Caucasian Chalk Circle'

WHEN THE houses of the great fall, all the little people share in their misfortune."

From the mouths of cooks, soldiers, peasants and even a singing narrator (Heidi Kobara), such pronouncements run throughout Bertolt Brecht's 1940s play set in Russian Georgia, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Though the story of the house servant Grusha (Arcadia Conrad)

gives the play a central thread, it's really a patchwork of scenes, narrations and plays within plays. Grusha's world breaks down in the wake of an assassination and coup. First, her lover, Simon (Benjamin F. Ladomirak), goes off to war, and then when she decides to care for the abandoned heir of the assassinated governor, she is forced to flee her home. While Grusha struggles to survive with the child and reunite with her soldier, various peasants, neighbors, soldiers, usually rushing toward or away from something, take the stage in intermittent glimpses of the wartime chaos.

They amplify the sense of breakdown. In one scene, a corporal (Elizabeth Finkler) berates a soldier for his lack of enthusiasm in mistreating a prisoner. Written by director Ana-Catrina Buchser, the haunting songs (based on Russian folk songs) of the narrator or of a Greek-style chorus contribute to the Brechtian ethos of bleak voices: "She who drags the child feels nothing but weight." Dragon Productions mounts the play with 14 actors, each playing multiple roles. One could easily lose track of the characters if Buchser had not ensured that each actor take on roles with similar voices. Sarah Kishler, her babushka shawl draped over her head, plays a cook, a peasant, a neighbor, but always with the most doleful commentary—"Once they start, they slaughter most families."

By leaving a lot to the imagination, Ron Gasparinetti's sparse stage set with a thatchlike frame situates the immediate action in undefined space. Place is only concretized off in the distance by occasional screen projections of a town. For the most part, somewhat stumbling portrayals of the lesser characters leave them wooden, and yet Brecht might be proud, for they're created in the tone of a wry omniscient chuckle. (This production is full of such chuckles.)

In fact, Finkler's halting performances as both the Agronomist and the Corporal actually enhance the disjointed feel of an unstable present. John T. Aney serves up a solid comedic take on Azdak, the drunken, accidental judge. As Grusha, Arcadia Conrad's performance stands out. Conrad manages to portray Grusha's good, hard-working Russian stock and her stoicism while also suggesting a soft, fond undercoating. The scenes between Grusha and Simon (Benjamin F. Ladomirak) form a poetic breath of warmth in the cold surroundings. Referring to each other in the third person as "the lady" and "the soldier," Simon and Grusha express their mutual attraction in coded language. Conrad and Ladomirak even reify place as the lovers talk across a river that divides them.

In an age that has mall developers taking private homes by eminent domain, this play's opening scene—goat herders' land is awarded to fruit tree project developers—is unremarkable (except for the irony that Brechtian communism is now American capitalism). And the chalk circle test for determining the true mother of a child comes from an old story—the biblical Solomon solved his dilemma much the way Judge Azdak does. But it's a bit unnerving to take in the accumulation of aphoristic voices (like "Terrible is the temptation to do good") as the texture of a larger ethos, where lots of negativity, planted in an undefined landscape, maps the anatomy of wartime.

Marianne Messina



SERIOUS PLAY Joshua Vasquez, Dashiell Grusky, Emmy Farese and Max Grusky pretend to be adults in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.